NEW PROPOSALS TO BAN HEATHER BURNING ON PEATLAND TO PROTECT AIR, WATER AND WILDLIFE

States News Service

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The following information was released by the UK Government:

Extension to ban of burning on deep peat proposed by Government, so that an extra 146,000 hectares are protected

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Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

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Peatlands store carbon, improve water quality, provide valuable habitat for wildlife, and help protect communities from flooding

Action will improve air quality in villages, towns and cities, help deliver manifesto commitments to reach Net Zero by 2050 and expand wildlife-rich habitat, as part of our Plan for Change

Nature-rich peatland habitats are to be better protected under plans set out by the Government today (Monday 31 March), which would ban burning on peat in the uplands, improving health and wellbeing of people in nearby communities.

Sometimes described as the country's lungs, peatlands are a vital resource which can store carbon, reduce flood risk, improve water quality, and support rare wildlife such as the golden plover and curlews. They are also some of our richest habitats for dragonflies with 25 of the UK's 38 species found on upland peatbogs.

However, 80% of England's peatlands are currently degraded. Burning on peatland increases heather growth, which dries out the peatland, causing it to actually emit rather than store carbon.

Burning of vegetation including heather on this scale causes the release of harmful smoke into the air, impacting air quality across communities. This includes harmful air pollutants for human health, including ones strongly associated with strokes, cardiovascular disease, asthma and some lung cancers.

Nature Minister Mary Creagh said:

Our peatlands are this country's Amazon Rainforest home to our most precious wildlife, storing carbon and reducing flooding risk.

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The UK has 13% of the world's blanket bog. A rare global habitat, it is a precious part of our national heritage, and that is why we're announcing a consultation on these measures to ensure deep peat is better protected.

These changes will benefit communities by improving air and water quality, and protect homes and businesses from flood damage, which supports economic stability and security under our Plan for Change.

If implemented, these changes will increase the area currently protected from 222,000 to more than 368,000 hectares of England's total 677,250 hectares of deep peat, meaning an area equivalent to the size of Greater London, Greater Manchester and West Midlands put together will now be better protected.

The definition of deep peat will be revised, so that deep peat is counted as anything over 30cms rather than 40cms. The entire area of upland deep peat that is potentially subject to burning will be protected.

This approach is being supported by evidence provided by Natural England. Any prescribed burning would need to be done under strict licence, issued where there is a clear need, for example to reduce wildfire risk.

The move comes as part of wider government plans to support nature recovery and clean up the air for our health, wellbeing and the environment. It is an important step in tackling the underlying drivers of ill-health as outlined in the Government's mission to improve health and follows announcements on the wild release and management of beavers in England, a new approach to neonicotinoid pesticides on crops grown in England and new measures to strengthen our protected areas and meet 30x30. The Government has also pledged up to 400 million for tree planting and peatland restoration, as part of its Nature for Climate Fund.

The consultation will run for eight weeks from today and the public and land managers are urged to have their say. The Government is proposing to refine the existing licencing system whereby applicants need to successfully explain why alternative methods have not or would not work and show how they intend to move the land away from the need to burn in future in order to receive a licence. One of the grounds to apply for a licence to burn will be to reduce the risk of wildfire, so we can balance environmental protection with practical land management.

The supporting evidence has also been published today. Natural England published a comprehensive updated Evidence Review on 'The effects of managed burning on upland peatland biodiversity, carbon and water', along with a Definition of Favourable Conservation Status for Blanket bog, which sets out its view on favourable conservation status for Blanket bog in England.

The England Peat Map, a detailed, open-access map of England's peatlands, covering extent, depth, and condition, is being developed by Natural England and will be published later in the spring.

Notes to editors:

The consultation on proposed changes to the Heather and Grass etc. Burning (England) Regulations 2021 will allow stakeholders time to comment and for responses to be analysed and fed into subsequent policy development.

The consultation is available on gov.uk and will run until 25 May.

It is proposed that the increase in total area protected would be achieved by changing the designated area from Sites of Special Scientific Interest that are also Special Areas of Conservation and/or Special Protection Areas to Less Favoured Areas.

In addition, the proposed changes would extend the regulations to protect shallower peat, over 30cm.

The amended licencing regime proposed by the consultation would enable land managers and owners to apply for a licence to burn in limited circumstances. For their application to be successful they must explain why alternative methods have not or would not work and demonstrate how they intend to move the land away from the need to burn in future.

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